

‘IT’S THE WAY IT’S WRITTEN’

NOTES ON THE
LITERARY EQUIP-
MENT OF A NEWS-
PAPER MAN.

By HENRY J. SMITH

THE CHICAGO DAILY NEWS

1921



'It's the Way It's Written'

Notes on the Literary Equipment of a Newspaper man.—The great opportunity in the Profession for Excellent Writing — A Few Suggestions.

*(An address delivered before the Joseph Medill School
of Journalism, Northwestern University,
Chicago, November 3, 1921.)*

By HENRY J. SMITH

of

THE CHICAGO DAILY NEWS



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2015

"It's the Way It's Written"

I. The Opportunity.

It is probable that while visiting landmarks of the Chicago loop you have seen a modest and weather-stained building of four stories on Wells street, hard by Madison street. You may even have entered this building, and having ascended by the leisurely elevator, and having got past the patriarch at the information desk, you may have penetrated that dusky region at the top thronged with partitions, desks, wires, tubes and people. It is a paradoxical place. At one desk a poetic genius taps out reviews of moving pictures; at another a novelist rich in imagination writes sketches of common things and people; at another a Hegelian philosopher concocts alluring "publicity;" at another a professor of Latin and Greek devises witty comment on books and events; at another an expert in Luxembourg folk-lore writes light verse about the folk-lore of Chicago and suburbs; and at many, many others people with imaginative gifts are expertly putting down words about traction, taxes, politics. But the paradoxes are incidental. The main thing about these upper story offices is that in them good writing has become a tradition, and excellent writing a topic discussed even by advertising men. You have set foot in one of those places, less clamorous than the coffee-houses of Addison's time, and less alcoholic than the nineteenth century haunts of New York's Park row, in which the literary element in journalism has

become a matter of gossip, of argument, of rivalry. Here the author of the day's best literary blossom sits on the corner of a desk, warmed by the admiring banter of "the boys." Here the consciousness of a dull first page spreads gloom like that behind the scenes when a new play fails to get a hand.

What I have sketched is not unique; it is typical; typical of those newspaper offices, more numerous in America than the disdainful European would grant, in which the manner of using our language is of very great moment. These newspapers remain unsatisfied with business office success, with winning races at the news-stands; even with telling the news in a manner more adequate than interesting. They want good writing, just as they want funny comics and impressive half-tones. They consider it proper, nay, necessary, to picture the strange jumble of human events in strokes as vivid, as touching, as humorous as the brush-marks of a novelist. They train imaginative men to use their gift in illuminating the actual. And they are anxious to get men to train. The number of geniuses "checking out" is as great usually as the number "checking in." So that no one of you who is conscious of the power of magic over a typewriter need hesitate to believe that some day he will be the hero sitting on the desk—or at least a part of the admiring audience.

I am to offer a few suggestions as to how you may take the right path to some top floor where the queen's English is not only safe from murder but immune even from insult. First, how-

ever, I should like to unload a theory or two about the right attitude of editors.

In popular tradition I suppose the editor is still a baleful figure handling a mean pair of scissors and hurling good copy into the wastebasket. Certainly this was the tradition a few years ago. You can hear many a good yarn about fire-eating editors, some of them dating back to Horace Greeley and Charles A. Dana, and others dealing with later types who acquired such nicknames as "old Legree" and "Butch." Some of these stories are nearly true; others are vouched for by "men who were there." But if you run them down you generally find that, when told of really great editors, they are legends invented by men who left the office in a hurry with a check for part of a week's salary. A really great editor knows better than to browbeat the sensitive talent that has attached itself to him. Charles A. Dana did not do it, according to those who knew him best, even though he was pictured as harsh by many a discard of the old Sun staff. If you have read Chester A. Lord's recollections of Dana you must have formed a mental image of a hard-working man of culture whose quiet encouragement to good writers brought out their very best. Mr. Lord himself during a generation gave deft help and warm sympathy to men with the gift of style. There exist today, even amid the greater complexity and worry of a newspaper executive's life, many managing editors and city editors—yes, and publishers, too—who combine kindness with strictness, and who exert a magnetism quite unaccompanied by any loud

noise. No first-rate staff can be built and sustained unless its chief is the equal of any two of his underlings in imaginative insight, in the grasp of a feature, nor can it be done unless he extends a comradely hand to those who work intensely at his bidding, and is ready to listen to an idea with a twinkle of appreciation instead of a bored scowl. A newspaper organization led by a serene, patient and affectionate chief cannot be a "madhouse." It becomes a community of hard-working and happily working beings, confident that even the make-up editor will give them their due, and able to be friends even with the copy-desk.

It ought to be valuable to you to know that there are scores of newspapers like this, and editors like this, that welcome the arrival of young talent and make a definite effort to develop it. For before you can face newspaper work at all, and certainly before you can hope to view it as an art, you will have to get rid of both cynicism and fear; the cynicism that you may absorb from people who say we are a lot of crooks, muddlers and charlatans; and the fear inspired by that comic-paper image of the fire-eating editor.

I do not believe that any of you are approaching journalism in a cynical spirit; and as for "stage fright" your first assignment will either cure you or kill you. But there is another state of mind almost as bad, if you really mean to be newspaper men. You may be thinking something like this; "Well, I'll stay in the newspaper business two or three years, and by that time

I'll be writing for the magazines;" or, "I'll get into some shop and have a decent meal ticket, and do a lot of writing on the side; maybe a novel or play. And then——"

These ambitions are as common as applicants for jobs just after commencement day. They are perfectly good ambitions. It is both pleasant and respectable to write for magazines. It is nice hard work to write a novel, and if one gets it published he may be lucky enough to get cigar money out of it, and a scrapbook full of reviews. But it might be asked: "If you look upon your newspaper job only as a meal ticket, why not find an easier job? Why not fish for some pleasant clerkship in the city hall, where you can get holidays eight or ten times a year? Or become secretary to an elderly invalid traveling in Europe?" The less the strain upon you in earning a living the more your literary work will thrive. I have always thought newspaper work, in its more intense phases, was a detriment rather than a help to literary work. For it is hard, and it grinds your brains to powder, and it sometimes makes one hate the sight of a typewriter.

Why should people so frequently regard newspaper writing as dull and mechanical, and throw a halo about magazine writing? There are reasons, of course; fairly sensible reasons. But I call your attention, for the moment, to the other side of the argument; I pass on to you the enthusiasms and prejudices of the newspaper fraternity, which insists that newspaper writing is just as honorable and important, and may be

fully as exciting, as contributing to magazines or burning midnight kilowatts over fiction.

What about the question of permanency? some one may ask. How can one's work be assured of more than a day's life when it goes into a newspaper? Well, it can't; but alas! what assurance of permanency can there be in writing magazine articles or books? The magazines use finer paper and prettier type than the newspapers; but somehow one can't tell the difference when the Salvation army collector carries them out of the basement. As for books, there is nothing deader than dead fiction. And your grief at beholding your first-page articles of yesterday decorating pantry shelves cannot be sharper than at finding your last year's novel slipping, slipping from the bookcase placarded "Popular fiction, \$2.00," back to the "Your choice, 75 cents" counter, thence to the "All books, 30 cents," and so to the junk-pile. Very few authors entirely escape this disgusting experience.

And then there is that question about the thrill. I grant you there is a delicious shock in having one's first novel accepted. For a few days one goes about feeling conspicuous on the streets, and with a slightly patronizing feeling toward old-timers like Thackeray and Victor Hugo. But as the weeks go by, and the exceedingly deliberate machinery of the publishing house revolves, delight is succeeded by pessimism, even by boredom. And when the finished volume is laid in one's hands it is like a fragment of ancient history. I know authors who can scarcely bear to look at the printed

version of ecstasies so long outlived. In magazine-writing, the strain on one's patience, the final disillusionment, perhaps, is similar. Thrill! Nothing can surpass, I think, the delight of writing with enormous concentration, with words pouring from one's typewriter, and then—then—seeing within the hour the result printed, actually printed in type on white paper, and knowing that this thing, hot from your fingers, is whirling away in great trucks and is being shrieked from news-stands.

The famous Billy Woods of "The Stolen Story" (Jesse Lynch Williams' excellent yarn about newspaper life) put the thing well.

"I should think," said one of his young friends after the star reporter had just returned from a long and distinguished assignment, "I should think that you would go in for magazine work, or write books——"

"And sign all four of my names in full?" returned Woods, "and write in the first person and say I did this and I said that? Why? Aren't newspapers and anonymity good enough for you? They are for me. *So long as I can make people feel things—that's all I want.*"

But still you may say: "I can reach a better public, a wider, more intelligent public, through the magazine than through the newspaper." I contend, in answer, that the newspaper-reading public is as intelligent as any, and none can be better. Would it be better if it were composed exclusively of scholars or of millionaires? And which is the wider public? That of the magazine may stretch over more states, but does it surpass that of the newspaper in variousness, in

quickness, in vigilance? Very seldom. You can count upon a newspaper public for instantaneous reactions. They are pleased if you do something good, and they revile you if you make errors. You hear from them by the next mail—especially in the case of errors. You cannot fool newspaper readers; that is, you can seldom fool all of them at one time. The circulation of a large newspaper comprises almost every type of human being known; it is a world in miniature, with all the passions, prejudices, likes and dislikes, insights and blindnesses of the race. You cannot find a more stimulating public.

In these last paragraphs I have dealt only with a pardonably selfish motive that leads some young writers rather to despise the newspaper as their publisher. But suppose you consider the future standards of American journalism. Shall it rise as it should to continually higher levels of intelligence and scholarship, or shall it be dragged down by cynics and idiots to their own level? In any line-o-type column you can find samples of the "breaks" made by newspaper editors too illiterate or too careless to deserve their jobs. We pass these over with a grin; but there is a serious side to the thing. There should not be so large a proportion of blunderers and clowns in responsible chairs. Every one of you who brings to the newspaper business the equipment to make it more honest, more convincing, more brilliant in its literary clothing will contribute to that future type of American newspaper which some time will predominate throughout the country, in the small towns as well as in the large cities.

II. *The Task.*

How to become a good newspaper writer!

Oh, the solemn sermons, the reams of addle-pated advice, written on that subject! Oh, the vague and misleading instruction passed out to innocent pupils by some correspondence schools of journalism conducted by men who "held high positions on leading dailies!"

While preparing this paper I asked a reporter of my acquaintance to shake up a prescription. He gave me this: "First find out what are all the rules the paper has, and then break 'em all." The remark was characteristic of him, and it didn't mean anything. I quote it simply for the grain of common sense underlying it. This is the fact that a newspaper should not crush its staff with fatuous rules, nor should a writer permit himself to be crushed by them. The rules that do count are such as all leading newspapers have, like the one that in a "straight news story" the principal facts must be stated first; like leaving most foreign words to the foreign language newspapers, like avoiding flippancy in connection with serious subjects. I recall that once when a sensational stock market rise happened on the church festival of Ascension Day a man began his story "on this, Ascension Day, most of the stocks on the list went up." And this writer was a veteran in the business. Some veterans get funnier the older they grow. The right principles are founded not on priggishness but on good taste and convenience to the reader. You will soon learn them, even if you have not already done so.

I offer you no set of rules, no easy guide to good writing. Instead, suppose we are sitting in the old cigar store on Newspaper Alley, where so much newspaper shop is talked that the cigar dealer is getting to look like Lord Northcliffe. And let us talk,—mainly about news writing, not Editorials.

To do any good writing you have to *care about it tremendously*.

This is what leading opera singers, painters, golf players, poker players do. They care about what they are doing tremendously. They take no account of the flight of time, of exhaustion, of obstacles to perfection. They are so intent upon the perfect note, the long drive, the exquisite line, or the fat pot that excellence comes to them almost without their being aware that they are working hard. One hates to say it, but I am afraid comparatively few people bring to the task of learning to write well the passionate enthusiasm, the tremendous energy that are put into things like music or sport. It is so easy to write passably; so easy to acquire a fluency that serves. You are surrounded, too, nearly everywhere, by the spirit of doing things "just so as to get by." If you are not assailed by it in college you are sure to hear it as soon as you are out of college. "Get by; do just enough; put over a good bluff; don't kill yourself." You'll hear it: the great American invitation to mediocrity. The word mediocre means "indifferent, ordinary." There is also "mediocre," a noun, to which an odd meaning is given in old English, that of "a young monk who was excused from performing part of a

monk's duties." Society will readily excuse you from yours. Society does not especially care whether you rise above mediocrity. It will let you trot along an easy path, if you choose one; and very likely, society being itself mediocre, for the most part, it may pay you well, and even puff you occasionally in its puff-ball organs of publicity. But to the man who really cares it is a bitter fate to be ordinary. Better fail: better fail, drop out, do something else, than be a slack, dull, or slipshod writer. In the end, even if you have a good job, you are likely to hate yourself. I have heard of one very popular novelist who has "got by" for years, and now he hates himself so badly that he's trying to reform; writes everything over six or seven times, trying really to write. It's hopeless. Mediocrity has him swamped. He didn't care enough to start with. The same thing goes in the newspaper business. It is full enough right now of white-blooded, faded, lack-lustre and shoddy writers. Yet, generally speaking, there is a lot less bluff, a lot less tolerance of mediocrity in the newspaper business than in most others. You're in a keen-witted crowd; they label you; they see through you. They're not going to excuse you; and even if you don't become a drifter from one newspaper office to another, you'll drop to the class of men who are allowed to stay along because nobody else applies, or because they work cheaply. You've got to care tremendously about newspaper work to learn it; and you've got to put your back into this business of writing before you can master it.

It follows, then, that you'll have to

Work like the devil.

I can't say it any other way and be emphatic enough. If I said "Work hard," I would only give you a picture of a plodder going along at an easy swing and eking out a full eight hours. Working like the devil means gritting your teeth, going to it with a high pulse, tying a wet cloth about your head, burning yourself up on the job. What if you do burn yourself up? It's worth doing for the sake of excellence, for getting out what's really in you, deep buried under layers of commonplaceness, literary conventionalities and perhaps laziness. You don't burn yourself up, though; you get hardened like steel. And your literary style becomes like steel, too; a sharp and unbreakable weapon in your hand. How do reporters get so that they can stay up all night at a national convention, and at five o'clock in the morning be still streaming out terse, pointed sentences with juice in them? They're not supermen. They've simply worked as though they *were* supermen, and now at the crisis the big strain so much resembles their ordinary experience that they don't realize it as anything extraordinary. Stroll into a big newspaper office any time, and you'll see veterans in the service—veterans all of thirty or thirty-five years old, some of them—working under high pressure, but without perspiration, or tearing their hair, or changing the angle of their well-chewed cigars. They are "hard-boiled." Their absorption, their concentration, at the right moments has become so trained that they show no trace. But don't you think that, some time or other, they had to work furiously on that training?

We'll assume you grant this rather obvious point. But what are you to work at? And how go about it? Well, I should say, the main thing is to

Write; write "*your heads off*."

Write all the time. Write whether you feel like it or not. Write whether you have anything to say or not. During this formative stage, write books if you please; or poems, or plays, or essays. Perhaps not a single piece will be worth offering to a magazine editor. I am not concerned about telling you how to write things that will please magazine editors. I am only urging you to give those literary muscles exercise. I am inviting you to get into the "gym" class, with its literary spring-boards, parallel bars, and running track. Most writers at the start are mentally muscle-bound, badly co-ordinated. There are thoughts in their heads but when the signal comes to their vocabulary to express these thoughts the result is stiff and self-conscious. The only cure for this is self-massage with one's own pen or typewriter. After you have written about half a million useless words there comes, sometimes suddenly, sometimes slowly, a mastery not only of words, but of sentences and phrases, that makes you a different being. It is like learning to swim or to navigate an aeroplane. You have conquered your element. From then on your personality, whatever that may be, goes onto paper unhampered, and thus exhilarated. Nearly all writers have had to pass this stage. Some reach it more naturally than others, and there

are geniuses who—but never mind geniuses. There are also writers—some of them celebrated—who never acquire ease, but have to fight their way through a jungle of words to finish their task.

One thing is pretty certain: If you confine yourself now to the exercises set for you in class, you will not be doing enough writing; and if, after you land that newspaper job, you write only the things the city editor tells you to, you will still be under-exercised. Nobody is going to make a writer of you. Writers are self-made.

Fifteen years ago I walked through the local room of *The Daily News* about half past five in the afternoon. The room was almost deserted; but one desk-light burned, and before it a young man not long past his 'teens sat grinding out sheet after sheet of copy. I knew this chap was not on the late watch. He should have been off duty hours before. I looked at the copy. It was not news; it wasn't anything recognizable at a glance. There seemed to be bushels of it. So, a bit puzzled by this youth pounding away in the dusk, I asked; "What's it all about?" He looked up smilingly, and answered, "I'm trying to perfect a style."

What I have given you is a glimpse of Paul Scott Mowrer at the outset of his career. Today he is a Paris correspondent. He was one of those who sent home the most vivid stories of the great war; and whose style, whether he employs it upon "human interest" topics or upon analysis of diplomatic tangles, is among the most brilliant, well-poised and flexible media of expression wielded by any journalist.

I have in mind how another young reporter mastered his element. I don't dare mention his name, for he lives in Chicago instead of in Paris. This youngster never got beyond high school. When I first heard of him his newspaper job was somewhere between that of a messenger boy and an assistant exchange editor. He cared tremendously about becoming a writer. He used to hover about when the reporters were talking shop, listening eagerly for any tip they might let fall about the way they wrote things; and he used to ask them how they did it. But none of them could tell him how they did it, and none of them cared much what became of him. So he had to invent his own way of becoming a writer. The first thing was to acquire words; a lot more words. He did this, not only by reading all the books he could, but by making a serious study of news stories and editorials. And whenever he came across a new word he noted it down and looked it up. Not only that, but he wrote sentences, hundreds of sentences, employing these new words in all sorts of ways, until the use of them became instinctive. It was almost like learning a foreign language to him. He grasped the idea that to learn English—or American, if you prefer that—he had literally to learn, just as though he had been acquiring Latin or French. This process went on until suddenly the city editor discovered that he had a cub who could “throw words around like everything;” and the city editor used to let him write little stories, which often astonished the copy desk. Once, he tells me, he was making a special study of the word “jettison,” and

by way of brightening up a little story of a lake storm he wrote that the passengers "jettisoned their lunch." But the copy-desk was quick to tell him when his mastery of words led him astray; and he listened good-naturedly, and put what he learned in his note-book. As he progressed, he invented new exercises. He used to take long stories that he found in the paper and rewrite them in condensed form. And he used to sit composing head-lines, although he had no idea of becoming a copy reader. But he knew that the squeezing of a twelve-word idea into sixteen letters was excellent practice in writing "short and snappy." Still another feature of his education was the writing of verse. He did not try to get anyone to print his verse; he simply used the practice to make his style firmer, more pointed, and more sparing of heavy phrases. And at last he had a style he could simply play with. He could sit down at the machine with a rush story in hand and stream off correct and vigorous writing faster than anybody in the office; or, if ordered to write a "freak story," he had the words to do it with. And thus, from being a cub, he advanced to be a reliable cog, and thence to be a "star feature man," which he still is.

I like to think of that youngster, toiling away at his sample sentences, going through his literary calisthenics, long after the rest of the staff had gone home, and there was nobody left but janitors emptying waste-baskets. I cannot help comparing him with other newspaper men I have known, who after twenty years work cannot put together three sentences correctly;

and with still others who say, "I can get the goods, but Lord knows I'm no writer." These so-called go-getters are great, but there is nothing to prevent their being twice as great—except that they won't write, and consequently can't write.

At this point let me drop a hint which I suspect the handbooks have overlooked. It is this:

Hang around writers.

I might have put it more elegantly by saying "associate with writers." But there's a shade of difference in meaning; it's harder to associate with people than to hang around them. I am not suggesting that you pursue writers down the street, or chase them to their homes to read manuscripts to them; nor do I propose that you force your way into an august body like the Society of Midland Authors. Just be crafty, and see if there isn't some writer or group of them that you can hang around. Try to find excuses for loitering near or among newspaper men of the better sort while they are talking shop. Haven't you some friend on a paper who will let you sit on a desk with him after the last edition is made up? Whatever place you can find where you can listen to writing chatter, make that one of your regular stops. This chatter is rich in suggestion for you. It is better than formal advice; the formal things you read or hear don't stick in your mind half as much as the chance remarks made by fellows "just talking." It is when they gabble among themselves that they reveal their hopes, their likes, their skepticisms. And they do it then in words of one syllable. It's what you soak in

from being in the right atmosphere that counts. If there were a newspaper club where reporters like to go I should favor admitting students of schools of journalism. As it is, there are only cigar store talk-fests, and so-called post-mortems in the offices or elsewhere. You'll hear wild and heretical comments on books and on editors; you'll hear strange judgments pronounced upon first page stories. But you needn't believe all you hear. The point is that you listen.

Now I suppose it is necessary to say something about reading. I am in danger here of repeating things you have already heard; or that have been better expressed elsewhere. But I will merely emphasize one or two things.

I want to emphasize volume and variousness of reading. There really isn't any conspicuous stylist who can't give you something. If I were dispensing tips for a literary career I should include even Chaucer and Milton; but since we are considering newspaper writing we'll let those archaic persons go. Shakespeare? Well, it would be heresy to let you pass up Shakespeare, and it wouldn't even be common sense for you to pass him up. Some one made a luncheon speech not long ago in which he said that if Shakespeare had lived today he would have been a great advertising man. This was because Shakespeare understood how to appeal to human nature. I might tell you with truth that he would have been a great reporter—perhaps not a go-getter, but at least a pretty fair feature writer. He was a reporter; a gorgeous reporter. You can learn from him. However, aside from

classical reading, whom should you read? Everybody; everybody who kindles you, not so much by his plots as by his individuality. Everybody who gives you the feeling: "I've struck something new; this fellow makes me see things; this man is strong medicine." The objective, of course, is to enrich you, not merely with words, but with actual essence from those highly developed minds. If you read a book with sympathy you take something from it that makes you more complex and more potent. But all this has been said 80,000 times before. For a newspaper man it is, in the first place, a shame to be ignorant—ignorant, as not a few are, of history and geography; and in the second place, it is a pity that any news writer should lack a vigor in writing which can be produced through imitation of vigorous writers. I suppose nobody graduates from a school of journalism who would credit King Herod with swimming the Hellespont, or would, like a reporter did some years ago, write that an immigrant spoke the "Austrian language." You are in a position here to get history and geography down pat; so I'll pass over that branch of reading.

Who are some of these writers—modern fellows, at that—who will help you to the best blend of style for newspaper work? When I entered the business there were still advisers who talked about Matthew Arnold and Macaulay; both famous stylists, no doubt, but on the whole a little stiff for the present age—and as un-American, incidentally, as anyone could be. At a later day the rage was all for Stevenson and

Kipling; a mystery story had to be Stevensonian and a divorce story Kiplingesque. Those unique personalities can still give you something perhaps, but more recently the fashion has been rather for H. G. Wells and O. Henry. Especially O. Henry. They have worked him to death, and heaven knows how many imitators he has; heaven knows, too, how many writers are compared with him without the least aptness. It's getting almost dangerous to compare one's friend with O. Henry. There is a great deal to be learned from this writer in respect to definiteness of local color and sharpness of syntax; but O. Henry is hardly in all respects a safe model for the newspaper writer of the future. He's a "little too much New York." H. G. Wells is of another type. His point of view is broadly journalistic, and his style combines vigor and solidity in a remarkable degree. It might repay you, too, to study writers like Booth Tarkington for minuteness of observation, and that remarkable new novelist, Dos Passos, for unflinching realism. And to return to the Englishmen, study Philip Gibbs for lucidity and sincerity and Lytton Strachey for complete control of the English tongue. Coming home again, right here at home, observe the ease and wit of "Eye Witness," the luscious phrasing and whiplash energy of Ben Hecht, the crisp informality of Paul Gilbert, the genial taunting quality and the scholarship of Keith Preston. As for poets, Carl Sandburg will teach you the volcanic force of plain words propelled by great emotion.

But it is altogether too easy to set down a patent list of celebrities. I urge you not only to absorb and analyze as many masterful writers as you can, but to study discriminatingly the work of those anonymous reporters whose work comes before you every morning and evening.

Let me read to you a short piece published in the Chicago newspapers awhile ago:

(On board vessel on the Volga river)—
There are no boating songs on the Volga this year.

The balalaika (the Russian guitar-like instrument) is not ringing from the few boats which are floating along this once mighty river. Its shallow waters are affording a poor avenue of escape from the parched grain fields which mock the peasants to whom they formerly yielded abundant bread.

Pawnbrokers have long since received the balalaikas in exchange for rubles necessary to buy food for the starving families.

Samoyars no longer sing merrily on the hearths of the peasant cottages. They, too, have been exchanged for bread.

Together with the family ikons and the bright brass candlesticks that once adorned every mantelpiece, they are exhibited in the second-hand shops of villages and cities while their former owners are huddled together in miserable camps along railways and rivers waiting for somebody to take them to a land of food.

Priests who are as miserable as their parishioners have set up altars in the wayside camps and are burying the dead and praying

for the half-dead who kneel submissively before the cross and intone their petitions to heaven at sunrise and sunset.

Fortunately, the sun does not fail them often. The autumn has been dry so far and the glorious Indian summer has made their lot more tolerable than it will be when autumn rains add to the misery of the unsheltered, poorly clothed hundreds of thousands.

A few families are still floating down the river in frail rowboats stacked high with children and battered household utensils.

The conditions are about as bad down the Volga as they are here, but the more restless refugees say they feel better if they keep moving. Here and there a family still has a horse or an ox which has managed to live on parched stubble, and is dragging along behind the rickety wagon until the time when it shall drop dead.

Cemeteries surrounding the churches which line the entire course of the Volga are crowded with refugees.

The drought and the grasshoppers have robbed them of bread. Their prayers have been of little avail. Their priests have not been able to get them food.

Yet they have not utterly lost hope and still devoutly cross themselves and feebly voice petitions as they slowly merge into the dust to which they are so soon to return.

Who wrote that? Oh, nobody in particular! Only an Associated Press correspondent. A faraway, lonely soul floating down the Volga

river on a battered steamer. He wrote it as the concentrated image of what he had seen. He wrote it without thought of rhetoric, I think; without any vain picture of an audience. There had happened simply this: He had witnessed the tragedy of a nation; his mind had become filled with imperishable visions. And, like a faithful reporter, he wrote down, as simply as one of the chroniclers of olden time, a sketch of what he had seen. And here is this sketch, published for millions of readers, an example of fine newspaper art. Day after day, if you search the papers with a keen eye, you can discover pieces of writing as good as this, or better; unsigned, sometimes humbly placed. Make the search for them a habit.

Suppose we analyze a bit the qualities of this story I have just read.

For one thing, I find only about twenty adjectives or words used as adjectives in the total of practically 400 words. Think how abstemious this man was. And consider the art necessary to produce vivid pictures without the handy little adjective. One of the maxims of Carl Sandburg is, "think twice before you use an adjective."

Another thing; Notice the small percentage of polysyllabic words and words of Latin origin. This man employs "Anglo-Saxon," the words of our common speech.

His sentences are short; or if he uses a long one here and there he sandwiches it between a couple of short ones.

While painting a broad picture, without a single name of a person or town in it, he succeeds in selecting details so homely, typical and

concrete that you feel as though you had actually witnessed a definite place and seen definite things happen. Journalism extraordinary! The work of no jazz journalist.

To show how easily this piece of newspaper writing might have been spoiled I will do a part of it over for you in the style of a jazz journalist:

"On the broad, gleaming bosom of the stupendous Volga as I learn and hereby cable exclusively after unheard-of privations there are no boating songs ringing out as of yore. The gleaming samovars never again will utter their joyous ditties from the broad hearths of the huddled cottages of the once wealthy and prosperous peasants. Once, many months ago, prior to the advance of the grim reaper, these samovars, together with the magnificent family ikons and the gorgeous brass candlesticks, adorned the mantelpieces of all homes in the fashionable residence districts of this the second largest town of the province of Samara. Now, come to a lowly estate, they are on exhibition in the fly-specked windows of the second-hand stores of the villages and cities, all of which I have recently visited in my capacity of special commissioner. The former owners, men once prominent millionaires, women once flaunting their beauty in a hundred salons, and children once ruddy-cheeked, swarm like flies in miserable camps along the interminable railways and the vast rivers waiting in terror and desperation for the arrival of that succor which shall mean to them transportation to a land of peace and plenty."

And so forth.

The lesson that emerges from all of this is that of self-control. First enrich yourselves, then simplify yourselves. Supposing you have increased your vocabulary by 200 per cent, and can hurl phrases by handfuls, and can beat the entrails out of a typewriter in ten minutes, the next thing is to master your own brilliancy. This is the greatest mastery of all. A great many things that pass for brilliancy are in reality nothing but verbose slop. One seems to see the rabid editor standing over his slave and roaring, "Jazz it up, you goof! Get pep into it. Make 'er smoke." And one sees the slave, with eyes starting from his head, hurling pompous adjectives and threadbare descriptive expressions, and thinking to himself, "By Golly, I'll kill 'em dead with this story." and one sees, perhaps, the paper issuing with smears of large-faced type, screaming its deadly commonplaces to the world in the guise of brilliant writing, and the thousands of poor gulls who never read anything better gulping all this in as they hang to straps in the elevated.

To belong to the distinguished company of real newspaper writers you must *rein in*. A great tragedy like that of Russia needs no artificial coloring. A story of a lost child or a tramp dying in the county hospital must be simply told. The bigger the story, the more it reaches into the complexities and mysteries of the human soul, the less it needs embroidery.

But I am getting too far into the province of your class-room instructors, and I am robbing some future editors of their privilege of telling cubs when and when not to be funny, and when

and when not to be flowery. Let me reeapitulate in brief the more or less practical advice I have given, and I shall have finished.

To become a good newspaper writer, then

First: care about it tremendously. Get on fire with the idea that writing is fascinating, thrilling, heart-breaking, better than anything in the world.

Second: Work like the devil. Take hold of this man's-size job, and sweat at it. Forget what you are paid; forget whether you're on daylight saving or central time. Hustle.

Third: Write! Write all the time, any kind of stuff. Never give the pen or typewriter a rest. Fill the campus wastepaper cans with your manuscripts. Prepare for the thousands of words you are to write by writing hundreds of thousands. Later, try to get on the rewrite desk of a paper, with some terrible go-getter shooting names and addresses at you, and the edition just going to press.

Fourth: hang around the fellows who know how to write.

Fifth: read everything that stimulates you. Let the cheap men alone, and don't bank too much on the best-sellers. Don't omit to scan the newspapers for the work of those comrades of yours who will never be best-sellers on their own account, but who do help journalism to be the mighty influence that it is.

And after having soaked in all you can of the power and joy available in this day of immense presses, grasp at that simplicity, dignity, and beautiful reticence that the ablest men of all have attained.

One more thing: It's a long road, and a tough one. Once on somebody's pay-roll you will wonder many times why they let you belong. You will encounter city editors who view your literary children with a cynical eye. You will be at the mercy of copy readers who will blot out your darling phrase, and slay your lovely lead because it hasn't the initial news fact in it. You will go out on a big story with an elder man, and when you come into the office he will be told to write the story, and he won't do it as well as you could have done. And you will sit sometimes brooding in the adjacent cigar store wishing that by Gosh you had gone into Uncle Will's leather business instead of into this deadly grind where you haven't got a chance. But newspaper offices aren't all alike, and every morning sun brings a new day and a fresh page in the assignment book; and if your story is butchered in the noon edition, why, maybe it'll appear in full in the five o'clock.

And just as sure as you keep at it long enough, some day a boy will bring a proof into the local room—a proof of your story—with "fine work" written on the margin in the Old Man's hand. And when you go home that night you'll hear one business man say to the other on the L: "Say, did you read this story in the Bazoo? It aint such important news perhaps, but it kind o' gets me. *It's the way it's written.*"

And then you'll feel that after all it was worth while to study journalism.

